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THE CONDITION OF FARM WORKERS AND SMALL FARMERS IN 1965, A REPORT TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND.

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THIS REPORT RECAPITULATES CONDITIONS AFFECTING THE SMALL FARMERS, SHARECROPPERS, AND AGRICULTURAL LABORERS IN 1965. THE AUTHOR PRESENTS INFORMATION ABOUT FARM LABOR STRIKES, UNIONIZATION, MECHANIZATION, AND STATISTICS OF ACCIDENT RATES, CHILD LABOR, WAGES AND EARNINGS, AND FOREIGN LABOR. THE AUTHOR EXPLAINS SEVERAL NEW FEDERAL AND STATE LAWS CONCERNING FARM LABORERS AND DESCRIBES THE FOLLOWING FEDERAL PROGRAMS--FARMERS HOME ADMINISTRATION, AGRICULTURAL STABILIZATION AND CONSERVATION SERVICE, OFFICE OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY, AND THE MANPOWER DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING ACT. INFORMATION EXPLAINING THE ACTIVITIES OF THE NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND IS ALSO PRESENTED. (JH)

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THE CONDITION OF FARM WORKERS AND SMALL FARMERS IN 1965

REPORT TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF NATIONAL SHARECROPPERS FUND
by Fay Bennett, Executive Director

"There still lies ahead the establishment for migrant farm labor of the standards of both decency and efficiency which are characteristic of other employment in this country."

Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz in Year of Transition: Seasonal Farm Labor, 1965

"I used to wonder how all my white neighbors got such fine cows and fine pastures and fine tractors. I kept snooping around and I found out my white neighbors were getting loans from the government. My [county] agent hadn't told me that!"

Participant in Alabama Conference on Governmental Anti-Poverty and Other Programs to Aid Low-Income Rural People, co-sponsored by NSF

"I think I've been on strike all my days 'cause I've been suffering all my days. I don't mind suffering . . . Let me suffer till I get to the good . . .. For God's sake stop grumbling and see the thing right."

Mrs. Adkins of Shaw, Mississippi, in statewide Mississippi Freedom Labor Union Meeting, Sept. 4, 1965

The Year in Brief

1965 was a year of transition and hope for hired farm workers, of dispossession and struggle for marginal farmers. The end of dependence on foreign contract workers and the proof that domestic workers were available if jobs met minimum standards characterized the transition. Strike action and union organization marked a new militancy among farm workers. Continued mechanization made thousands of sharecroppers "expendable" and day laborers idle, as economic change was brutally speeded by evictions following voter registration and other civil rights activities. The war on poverty moved into southern rural areas but its pace lagged far behind the national effort.

Fewer and Richer Farms; Fewer and Poorer People

Between 1939 and 1964, 2.4 million farms disappeared; 95 per cent of them were small farms with less than $2,500 in annual gross sales, and about a fourth of them were worked by sharecroppers. Only about 1.5 million small farms are left now. In the same period, the number of farms with gross sales of $10,000 and more rose two and one-half times. In the South, three million people have left the land since 1940. Most of those forced off southern farms have been Negro sharecroppers and tenant farmers who have migrated to northern and western ghetto communities. (At one point they were flocking to the Watts area in Los Angeles at the rate of 1,000 a month.)

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The displacement of people from southern farms may be accounted for by many factors. Chief among these is continued mechanization. Mechanical cotton pickers and grain harvesters are eliminating sharecropping in the deep South, leaving only half a million day laborers. In the Delta area, 95 per cent of the cotton will be machine-picked in 1966--in contrast with 69 per cent in 1965--and 20,000 more farm laborers will be made idle. The coming mechanization of tobacco will have a similar effect in states just to the north of the cotton belt. Across the continent in California, about a third of the 1965 tomato crop--116,000 acres--was reaped by 262 machines; in 1966, a major portion of the tomatoes will be planted for machine harvesting.

Hundreds of farmers are being dispossessed in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana for participating in civil rights activities. The dispossession of others will be speeded by the Food and Agriculture Act of 1965; in the Mississippi Delta alone, one-third of the 925,000 cotton acres will be taken out of production.

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Productivity continues to rise. The labor of one farm worker supplied the farm product needs of 11 people in 1940, 15 in 1950, 26 in 1960, and 33 in 1964.

Hired Farm Workers

There are about 2.5 million households with one or more members who do some hired farm work during the year. More than half of these live below the poverty level (defined as less than $3,000 income from all sources); in this group are more than 80 per cent of the non-white families, and more than 70 per cent of the families headed by a migrant.

In 1964, the last year for which full figures are available, there were approximately 664,000 full-time farm workers in the United States and about 2.5 million seasonal workers. Of these, about 386,000 were migratory workers and 272,000 of them did 25 or more days' work during the year. In 1964, migrants worked an average of 131 days at farm and nonfarm work and earned an average of $1,240. Nearly half (44 per cent) of them did both farm and nonfarm work with average earnings of $585 at farm work and $1,049 at nonfarm work. Those who did only farm work averaged $935 in annual earnings. A special wage survey made by the Department of Labor in May, 1965, covered 1.5 million farm wage workers. Seventy per cent of them were paid less than $1.25 an hour. More than one-third (in the South, 54 per cent) were paid less than 75 cents an hour.

Safety. The National Safety Council has again branded agriculture as one of the most hazardous of all industries. In 1965, agriculture ranked below only the mining and construction industries in death rate. It had the largest total number of deaths, 3,200, and 270,000 disabling injuries.

Children. More than one-fourth of the entire hired farm working force are young people less than 17 years of age. (In 1962, farm wage worker households with less than $3,000 income included 3 million members not yet 18, about 27 per cent of all children and youth in the poverty sector.) There is as yet no national legislation to prevent child labor in agriculture outside of school hours, as there is in other industries. "Crop vacations" are common from Maine to Louisiana, nullifying the school-hour protection. In the year ending June 30, 1965, Department of Labor inspectors found 2,300 farms violating child labor laws and a total of 7,076 children under 16 working during school hours. More than half of these were in the 10-13 age bracket.

Housing and Health. Despite the existence of new government programs providing financial aid for farm labor housing, too many farm worker families still live in miserable conditions. Investigation into an alleged labor shortage in Florida last spring uncovered these conditions:

> ". . . There are no camps in Dade County with indoor plumbing for each cabin. The electrical outlet provides a bare bulb for light. . . . Sometimes burlap is the only privacy between rooms. The floors and walls are generally bare, unpainted planks. Families with 10 and 12 children can live in one two-room shack for $8 to $10 a week. . . .'A new camp would have to live up to the letter of the law,' says [one] Sanitation Inspector. . . .'That's why there are so few new camps.'"

Small wonder that migrant families are more prone to illness than others; that diarrhea is chronic among children; parasitic and fungal diseases common; neglect of teeth, eye, and ear ailments prevalent.

Foreign Workers. 1965 was the year of transition for farm labor, domestic and foreign. Mexican braceros, always the bulk of foreign contract workers, were no longer available under Public Law 78, which had expired. The challenge of attracting a sufficient number of domestic workers to replace them had to be met and, for the most part, was met. Use of foreign labor was reduced 83 per cent, from 634,000 man-months (equivalent to 52,800 full-time jobs) in 1964, to 110,000 man-months (9,200 jobs) in 1965; Mexican labor was reduced 95 per cent. In 1964, there had been

178,000 Mexican contract workers in 17 states; in 1965, there were 20,300, all in California. The use of British West Indians did not decrease proportionately. In 1964, there were 14,000; in 1965, although there were 14,100 in Florida alone, man-months dropped from 81,000 to 64,000; but there were also 1,340 BWI's working in apples and 800 in tobacco. The number of Canadians imported to New England states dropped from 8,000 in 1964 to 4,484 in 1965--3,627 in potatoes and 857 in apples. Of the 1,080 Japanese and 110 Filipinos in the United States at the end of 1964, 200 Japanese remained by the end of 1965. All of the temporary workers imported in 1965 came in under P. L. 414, the Immigration and Nationality Act.

Average hourly wages for farm workers rose from $1.08 to $1.14, the largest one-year increase since the Korean War. Crop values were up even in the three crops--asparagus, strawberries, and pickle cucumbers--where crop losses may have been attributable in part to labor shortages. The price of fresh fruits and vegetables went down in 1965 (by 4.5 per cent, comparing November, 1964, to November, 1965), while the Consumer Price Index rose 1.7 per cent.

Farm Worker Organization

Large-scale militant union activity among farm workers developed in 1965 in widely separated parts of the country.

Cotton choppers and pickers, paid $2.50 or $3.00 for a 10-hour day, formed 90 per cent of the membership of the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union; but they were joined by tractor drivers, haulers, domestic servants, part-time carpenters, mechanics, handymen, former sharecroppers, and renters. The MFLU demands were for a $1.25 an hour minimum wage, an 8½-hour day with time-and-a-half for overtime, sick pay, health and accident insurance, and equal employment practices. Evicted strikers and croppers set up a tent city. If MFLU cannot bring the huge plantation owners to the bargaining table, it may at least focus national attention on the need for alternatives for the poor people of the cotton country.

The grape strike broke out after Filipino workers returned from Coachella Valley, California, where they had received $1.40 an hour plus an incentive piece rate, to Delano where wages were $1.25 and the incentive smaller. They called for help from the AFL-CIO's Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. When employers refused to discuss wages, working conditions, and a union contract, between six and eight hundred workers struck. Within two weeks, 1,200 Mexican-Americans, organized in the National Farm Workers Association, joined them. Harrassment and arrests by employers and local authorities were constant. The strike continued from the picking season into pruning, the beginning of the next crop year. (In 1966, Schenley Industries has recognized the union and the Di Giorgio Corporation has suggested an election.)

Other areas were affected. At Lantana, on the East Coast of Florida, 14 farm workers struck, demanding a wage increase, but lost; just south of Lantana a strike was averted when demands were met. A wage increase was secured in the Pompano Beach area by a strike threat coupled with a labor shortage. A five-day strike of 800 British West Indian cane cutters at the Okeelanta Sugar Refinery was lost. The Steelworkers union organized Cypress Gardens Citrus Products, Inc., of Eloise, Florida's largest multi-purpose citrus plant, as the beginning of an organizing drive. In Louisiana, the Fish, Seafood, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union No. 300 secured for Gulf Coast pogy boatmen their first over-all pay increase in 25 years. Local 300, affiliated with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters, includes dairy, sugar, and rice workers in addition to the fishermen.

Legislation

Congress moved slowly in 1965 on bills which proposed coverage for farm workers under minimum wage requirements, child labor regulations, collective bargaining guarantees, and unemployment compensation. Although both Senate and House worked on separate, similar bills, only one piece of legislation --a House proposal to include

farm laborers under minimum wage coverage--was reported favorably out of Committee, but it did not come up for a vote before the session ended. (In March, 1966, a new minimum wage bill was reported favorably out of Committee.) In September, 1965, a proposal to transfer the authority to import foreign workers in times of domestic labor shortage from the Labor Secretary to the Agriculture Secretary was narrowly defeated.

More action was seen in state legislatures than in some years. Five states strengthened regulations governing housing and sanitary conditions. California enacted the first law requiring employers to provide sanitary facilities in the fields. Texas now requires a tuberculosis examination for persons seeking migratory work. Florida and Michigan set safety standards for motor vehicles used to transport migratory workers, and California improved its vehicle code. North Dakota deleted the exemption for agricultural workers from its minimum wage law, but Michigan suspended coverage of certain agricultural operations. New Jersey broadened its wage payment and collection law to include agricultural workers. Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, and Oregon amended workmen's compensation laws to provide some coverage for agricultural workers.

Federal Programs

Farmers Home Administration. In 1965 FHA loaned more than $798 million to help 12,186 farm families buy, enlarge, or develop farms; gave short-term operating credit to 118,000; assisted more than 12,000 with antipoverty loans; loaned $13 million which provided new or improved housing for more than 5,500 rural persons aged 62 and older; and gave credit assistance to 388 rural communities to construct water systems. Unfortunately, however, generations of discrimination have produced such inequalities that many Negro farmers cannot now meet qualifications for loans. In several Southern states, little change is yet visible. The number of farmers who have applied but not received loans is not known, and others have not even applied either because they do not know how or because they are sure they will be rejected.

ASCS. According to Department of Agriculture reports as of December 30, 1965, in the 1965 Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service elections 12,471 Negroes were on the ballot for various offices in 14 southern states. None was elected either member or first alternate to a County Committee but five were elected second alternates. On the Community Committees, 85 were elected regular members, 131 first alternates, and 303 second alternates. Without members on County Committees, Negro farmers still lack the effective representation needed to change traditional discriminatory policies. Reports from Deep South states indicate that in some areas elected Negro members are not being notified of Community Committee meetings or allowed to participate in their activities.

Office of Economic Opportunity. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 made possible, under Title III-B, programs for farm workers in education, sanitation, day care, and self-help housing. In 1965, OEO granted some $26 million in Title III-B funds to 65 public and private nonprofit organizations in 20 states. Around 350 VISTA volunteers are working with migrants. Under EOA's rural loan programs, nearly 25,000 rural families received $36.5 million in 13 months (including January, 1966), and in southern states, nearly 40 per cent of the family loans have been made to Negro borrowers. OEO has financed small machinery cooperatives, and more than half of these are made up partly or entirely of Negro farmers. EOA made possible additional projects under Community Action Program auspices, but the most impoverished communities--mainly in the rural South--have received the least antipoverty funds, because they lack the organization and technical help needed to initiate projects.

Training Programs. Since 1962, more than 20,000 persons have been trained in agricultural skills under the Manpower Development and Training Act and the Area Redevelopment Act. Training is also given in basic literacy skills and for nonfarm occupations in areas where workers are needed. Hundreds of thousands are in need of such training as their old agricultural occupations are disappearing.

A Program for Rural America

The crises of American cities and farms, so different on the surface, are inextricably bound together. Dramatic evidence is the annual migration of a million people from rural to urban areas.

Remedial programs are needed to raise the living standards of rural people: inclusion of farm workers in all the protections of social legislation that benefit industrial workers; increased programs of loans and technical assistance to enable small farmers to remain on the land and to raise their income levels.

But beyond that, a program is needed large enough to meet the human needs of the rural areas:

* A million new rural homes are needed in the next ten years, and two and one-half million homes need major repairs.
* Rural medical, hospital, nursing, and dental services must be brought up to urban standards.
* Educational facilities must be increased at least to urban levels, requiring a 40 per cent greater investment in education, including construction of approximately 50,000 new classrooms.
* 30,000 rural town water and sewage systems are needed.

Vocational training and remedial education are needed to equip people for employment in these construction and development projects. The training of professionals to staff increased facilities will call for a steadily expanding number of educators and educational institutions. Following the basic medical and educational services should come a host of other social, cultural, and recreational facilities and personnel.

From a quarter to a half million new jobs could be created to meet the basic and expanding needs of the rural areas. On the basis of the new job-created incomes, the disappearing small towns of stagnating rural economies will become thriving small cities with new needs, new construction, new business, in a spiraling cycle of activity.

National Sharecroppers Fund

*has field representatives in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee, helping poverty-stricken people to help themselves, bringing knowledge of federal assistance programs available, and working to end discrimination in their implementation. (Four representatives work under the Rural Advancement Project, NSF's cooperative program with the Southern Regional Council and the State Councils on Human Relations.)

*set up the Southern Rural Training Project under contract with the Department of Labor to stimulate and develop training programs for the hard-core rural poor.

*carried on a crash five-month Farm Labor Counseling Program to advise unemployed rural poor about criteria farm jobs, training opportunities, and other means of increasing their employability and income.

*works to end the exclusion of agricultural workers from the protections and benefits of social legislation that other workers enjoy, and to protect them from the unfair competition of foreign contract labor.

*supports the efforts of farm workers in organizing unions and low-income farmers in organizing cooperatives.

*works with government and other private agencies to help low-income rural people secure a better life.

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